central Great Basin. By the end of the 1840's there were a number of rest stations for emigrants, at the foot of new trails across the Sierras, in Carson and Eagle valleys, on the Truckee River, and in Sierra Valley. Thousands of head of cattle were grazed there, and wagon trains paused for months at a time waiting for the appropriate season for the final crossing. By 1859 gold had been discovered in the area, logging and lumber became a major industry, ranches and farms created a network of fences in most of the valleys, and numerous white settlements had sprung up containing a rapidly increasing population of permanent settlers, miners and laborers.

There is some evidence that the Washo may have suffered a drastic decrease in population and some tribal disorganization prior to these events of the 1840's and 50's. Extensive epidemics had raged through the Indian tribes of central California during the first few decades of the 19th century, and Washo legend contains numerous references to the devastation of entire bands by disease before the period of American settlement. There are also legends of early Spanish expeditions, the working of mines in the mountains, and the capture of Washo children. The publication of more of the records of these expeditions may bring to light material of considerable importance with regard to initial Washo contacts with non-Indians.

At the point of first intensive white contact in the late 1840's and early 1850's the Washo also appear to have been under attack from mounted groups of Paiute, and there is every indication that their willingness to cooperate with whites was a response to the need for protection from Paiute raiding. The Washo never adopted the horse for hunting or warfare as did their neighbors directly to the east, and this fact put them at a great disadvantage during the tumultuous years of competition between the newly emergent raiding bands of the Paiute and the white emigrants. That they never surmounted the effects of this initial inferiority of status is borne out by their almost total eclipse in official records during the remainder of the 19th century, and by the neglect of their desperate condition on the part of government and local administrators. This is all the more curious in view of the fact that they appear to have increased in population during the past hundred years, and have maintained viable social groups and cultural continuity.

Though historical documentation and early ethnographic comment concerning the Washo are meager, what resources do exist are of great potential value to the student of their culture. The first phase of the historical record is that marked by the journals and reports of trappers, explorers and emigrants prior to 1850. The initial venture over this section of the Sierras appears to be that of Jedediah Smith and a party of trappers who went into Spanish California by way of Walker Pass in 1825 or 1826. In 1833 Joseph Walker led a party of trappers up the Truckee River to California, and a diary of the trip was kept by Zenas Leonard, a member of the party.